

Funder Collaboration – Is it worth it?

The Child Sexual Exploitation Funders' Alliance

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The Child Sexual Exploitation Funders' Alliance (CSEFA) is a group of 12 charitable fundersⁱ who came together in 2012 to bring about a step change in the way child sexual exploitation is dealt with in the UK. Specifically, they wanted to see responses to child sexual exploitation positioned as an integral part of mainstream safeguarding.

CSEFA members believe that by bringing together funders' knowledge, reach, resources and time, more has been achieved than would have been the case had the funders worked individually. As such, in this context, funder collaboration is definitely worth it. In the spirit of learning, and for the benefit of others interested in funder collaboration, this short paper sets out CSEFA's key features, benefits and challenges.

1. The collaboration

- **Expert strategy and evaluation:** Funders are working towards a shared strategy developed by expert researchers at the University of Bedfordshire, led by Professor Jenny Pearce.ⁱⁱ All of the funded projects are contributing to this evaluation.
- **Decision-making:** Potential projects are collectively identified by CSEFA, in line with the agreed strategy. The projects are then invited to apply to specific funders individually, with funders continuing to use their own application, decision-making and monitoring processes. Funders are aligned in *purpose* but they are independent in terms of *process*.
- **Open membership:** CSEFA operates an open policy, enabling new members to join in line with their own charitable objects and grants policies. Members sign a Memorandum of Understanding, outlining the collaboration parameters. Other funders are welcome to join meetings and papers are circulated via an online platform.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Lean administration:** A core group of funders has led CSEFA, and the wider membership meets every two months to review progress and plan ahead. Paperwork is kept to a minimum and there is no paid secretariat; responsibility for chairing, minuting and organising meetings has been shared by the core group and has rotated according to capacity. While this has not been without its challenges, it has not hindered CSEFA's operations.
- **Policy:** As CSEFA's work has progressed, so too has recognition of the skills and time needed to develop relevant and vital policy and advocacy work. CSEFA has therefore also funded a policy position within the University of Bedfordshire, to enable key analysis and messages to be synthesised and shared with different audiences.

2. Benefits

- **Amount and reach of grants awarded:** 38 grants totalling c.£6.4 million have been made to support 16 voluntary sector projects across England working in the field of child sexual exploitation. This includes expansion into areas that previously had limited or no services available such as Sussex and North Yorkshire. In the majority of cases, funding terms are for three years; a feature welcomed by grantees.
- **Speed of response:** As funding was aligned rather than pooled, CSEFA was able to move quickly, which was important in terms of seizing the moment on a topical issue. Funders being able to retain their own grant-making processes may also have supported faster decision-making.
- **In-depth evaluation:** Working separately, funders would not have been able to fund such an expert and extensive evaluation. The evaluation fieldwork is providing valuable insight into how the projects are operating on the ground; the evaluation itself will provide robust evidence for the projects to use when making a case for funding, as well as information for policy makers. Funders have also had stronger confidence in the decisions they make in this complex (and, for some, unfamiliar) field because these decisions are underpinned by an expert-led strategy and evaluation.
- **Shared learning (for funders):** Knowledge of how to fund work related to child sexual exploitation has been shared across three times the original number of funders that initiated CSEFA. Working with the University of Bedfordshire has ensured that: funding decisions have been based on evidence about the needs of children and young people and that funders are well-informed about voluntary sector work around child sexual exploitation.
- **Shared learning (for grantees):** The University of Bedfordshire has facilitated an annual learning event between all of the projects funded as part of the collaboration; something that is unlikely to happen with individual grants. Grantees have benefited from introductions to other funders who have already made the decision to make aligned grants around this issue as well as introductions to other practitioners.
- **Diversity of funders:** CSEFA has attracted a large and diverse group of funders (size, type, geography, focus); both scale and diversity of funding priorities are thought to be critical to implementing the strategy.^{iv} The loose structure has enabled CSEFA to respond to the differing constraints/needs of its members, and the amount of time commitment required of members has been small.

3. Challenges

- **Grantee experience – ‘Living with a faulty system’:** Grantees described the familiar experience of having multiple funders with different application, reporting processes and timelines. While they did not necessarily want CSEFA to divert resources into addressing this problem, they did suggest that small organisations needed extra support and flexibility. There have been some examples of funders agreeing to share processes, but such progress has been limited: *‘It takes time to trust each other’s systems’*.
- **Diverse experience and expectations:** Arriving at a shared understanding of what is an appropriate policy, advocacy and communications role for independent funders in a fast moving context, was unlikely to be straightforward, particularly for those with a public facing role and accountability. In response to this challenge, the funders who had policy and advocacy experience took the lead, and, as described above, a policy position was created.
- **Establishing structures:** In many ways, having a loose structure has benefited CSEFA’s work though it has relied on a core group driving the work forward. Establishing where tighter structures are going to be necessary has been a challenge, and will continue to be under review as CSEFA moves into a new phase.
- **Context and flexibility:** In the three years since CSEFA’s inception, the context of this work has changed dramatically, driven largely by the high profile media cases of child sexual exploitation. Many statutory authorities are investing more in this area. For CSEFA, while this is most welcome, it also highlights the need to continually reflect upon and review the original strategy, relevance of the work and ways forward.

4. Conditions for successful collaboration

- **Respect:** The culture of CSEFA is respectful, trusting and calm with a marked absence of egotism. Everyone is welcome and can find a place at the table and a role within the group. A spirit of mutual accountability, shared responsibility and a respectful attitude to their institutional differences mean that members are able to question one another. A *‘habit of positive communication’* makes it easy to discuss difficult issues when they arise.
- **Focus:** CSEFA has, from the outset, had a shared plan – in the form of a strategy – which has enabled them to align their funding, specify boundaries and set priorities. Members underline that CSEFA is only as good as its strategy and acknowledge that maintaining focus on that strategy is critical to its success.^{iv}
- **Leadership:** All those involved in CSEFA were conscious that even a successful collaboration needs constant attention (*‘collaboration management’*) as well as champions with the vision to drive it forward. CSEFA has been chaired skilfully in ways that were described as flexible, accommodating and pragmatic. Meetings are purposeful and well attended.

5. Where next?

- The University of Bedfordshire is evaluating the work funded by CSEFA and has recently reported on the CSEFA's second year; a final report will be published in 2017. The University of Bedfordshire will also produce policy and practical resources building on the experience.
- Over the next couple of years there will be knowledge sharing and evaluation dissemination events.

If you are interested in hearing more about the collaboration first hand or are interested in becoming involved then please contact:

Cullagh Warnock cullaghwarnock@blueyonder.co.uk

Debbie Walmsley d.walmsley@comicroelief.com

Katherine Brown kbrown@henrysmithcharity.org.uk

For more information about the evaluation please contact:

Julie Harris julie.harris@beds.ac.uk

About this paper

This paper is based on a series of studies conducted by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) to support the development of CSEFA. We interviewed representatives of the 12 independent trusts and foundations that make up CSEFA, first in 2014 and again in 2015. Also in 2015, we interviewed the first eight organisations to have received grant funding through CSEFA. These interviews were complemented by a review of CSEFA's governance documents and interviews with the Chair of the Expert Reference Group and with the Principal Investigator at the University of Bedfordshire. The researchers were Leila Baker, Charlotte Hennessy and Charlotte Pace.

ⁱ The Barrow Cadbury Trust, BBC Children in Need, The Big Lottery Fund, The Blgrave Trust, The Bromley Trust, Comic Relief, The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, The Henry Smith Charity, Lankelly Chase Foundation, Northern Rock Foundation, Samworth Foundation and Trust for London

ⁱⁱ The strategy '*Child Sexual Exploitation: Funding for the Future, University of Bedfordshire*' supported by the CSEFA was developed by Professor Jenny Pearce at the University of Bedfordshire. She and her colleagues continue to advise CSEFA. The implementation of CSEFA's strategy started in September 2013. It is overseen by an Expert Reference Group, chaired by the Deputy Children's Commissioner, Sue Berelowitz.

ⁱⁱⁱ CSEFA uses an online platform provided by Ariadne, which is a European peer-to-peer network of more than 400 funders and philanthropists who support social change and human rights.

^{iv} This echoes one of the findings of the review of the Corston Independent Funders' Coalition which identified the importance of having '*a diverse group of funders and a critical mass with sufficient funds to make things happen*', Kaufmann, J. (2011) *Funders in Collaboration: A review of the Corston Independent Funders' Coalition (CIFC)*, London: CASS Business School.

^v Maintaining vision is a common challenge for collaborative working. See, for example, IVAR (2011) *Thinking about collaboration*, London: IVAR